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Holistic Health: Bridging Disability and Mental Well-Being Promotion through Community Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a critical aspect of overall well-being, yet it remains an often-overlooked component in health and fitness programming, particularly for people living with physical disabilities (PLWD). In the United States, more than 70 million adults—more than one in four—live with a disability, and this number is expected to reach 80 million by 2030 (1). People living with physical disabilities face higher rates of comorbid conditions, such as heart disease and obesity, and have a life expectancy up to 20 years shorter than their peers without disabilities (2). In addition to physical health challenges, PLWD experience frequent mental distress nearly five times more often than individuals without disabilities (3). Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, all of which influence how individuals think, feel, and act throughout their lives (4). Addressing both the physical and mental health needs of PLWD in health and fitness programming is essential to improving their overall quality of life.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated mental health challenges for many individuals, leading to a significant increase in anxiety, depression, and social isolation worldwide (5). For PLWD, the pandemic's impact on social, emotional, and mental health was complex. Although many experienced heightened isolation and stress, some found relief from certain physical barriers, such as inaccessible transportation, as remote work and virtual services became more common (6). However, with the return to prepandemic norms, these barriers have reemerged, once again limiting access to inclusive environments and support systems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), PLWD are more likely to experience mental health disorders due to factors such as social isolation, discrimination, and the challenges of navigating inaccessible environments (6). These disparities underscore the urgent need for programs that address mental health and physical health in tandem.

Exercise professionals are uniquely positioned to play a pivotal role in supporting the social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs of PLWD. Research has shown that integrating mental health support into fitness programs can lead to significant improvements in overall well-being, including better mood, reduced anxiety, and increased resilience (7). Programs that address both physical and mental health allow PLWD to cope more effectively with the unique challenges they face, improving their ability to participate in daily activities. By co-creating programs with PLWD and involving them at every stage—from design to implementation to evaluation—exercise professionals can ensure their interventions are relevant, impactful, and sustainable (8).

However, several barriers hinder the effective implementation of mental wellness programs for PLWD. These include

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stigma surrounding both disability and mental health, issues with accessibility to services, and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among mental health professionals, exercise practitioners, and other specialists (9,10). Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), many mental health services remain inaccessible, particularly for underserved communities where physical accessibility, communication accommodations, and culturally competent care are lacking (9,11). Successful mental health integration into fitness programming requires coordination across disciplines, addressing these barriers while creating inclusive, supportive environments for PLWD. By incorporating SEMH strategies into fitness programs, professionals can make a significant impact on the overall quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

THE ROLE OF EXERCISE PROFESSIONALS

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental wellness for PLWD, significant gaps persist in both the availability and accessibility of appropriate mental health resources (8, 12). Traditional mental health services often fail to address the unique needs of PLWD, resulting in inadequate support and care (13,14). Exercise professionals are well positioned to bridge these gaps by implementing integrated wellness programs that combine physical and mental health strategies. These professionals are uniquely situated to provide holistic care, addressing both the physical and mental health needs of PLWD by creating inclusive, accessible programs that promote overall well-being.

Collaboration across disciplines is essential for the development of these comprehensive wellness programs. Working with mental health professionals and other specialists allows exercise professionals to integrate SEMH components into fitness programming, creating environments that promote resilience and mental well-being alongside physical fitness. The Framework for Public Health's Role in Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention emphasizes the importance of community-based, inclusive, and equity-driven interventions that address mental health disparities and build resilience in marginalized populations, including PLWD (15). By adopting these principles, exercise professionals can create safe spaces within fitness sessions where clients can enhance not only their physical capabilities but also their social and emotional well-being.

Research consistently demonstrates that mental, emotional, and physical health are deeply interconnected, and programs that address all these dimensions lead to better overall health outcomes. To ensure these programs are effective, they must actively involve PLWD at every stage—design, implementation, and evaluation (16,17). Co-creating programs with PLWD ensures their specific needs and challenges are addressed, resulting in more relevant, impactful, and sustainable outcomes (8). By engaging PLWD in this way, exercise professionals can tailor programs to improve both physical and mental well-being, enhancing client satisfaction and adherence.

Although many exercise professionals may not have formal training in mental health support, they can still enhance their wellness programs through interdisciplinary collaboration. By partnering with mental health experts and incorporating the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, exercise professionals can create more comprehensive and tailored wellness programs. This collaborative approach fosters an inclusive environment that bridges gaps in mental healthcare and creates opportunities for PLWD to actively shape the services they receive, ultimately leading to better overall health outcomes.

PURPOSE OF THIS CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

The purpose of this *Clinical Applications* column is to explore how exercise professionals can incorporate SEMH elements into their programming for PLWD. It aims to educate professionals on the SEMH challenges faced by PLWD, provides strategies for implementing equitable mental health promotion within fitness activities, and offers resources to support these efforts. By fostering environments that support both physical and mental well-being, exercise professionals can make a significant impact on the overall quality of life for PLWD.

INTEGRATING SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MENTAL WELLNESS IN FITNESS PROGRAMS: KEY DEFINITIONS, RESOURCES, AND STRATEGIES

The following tables provide a comprehensive framework for exercise professionals to integrate SEMH into their programming for PLWD. These resources and strategies are based on evidence and insights gathered from interviews and focus groups (18). Table 1 outlines key mental health conditions and their associated symptoms and possible medications, offering clear definitions to help exercise professionals recognize and address mental health challenges in their clients. Table 2 provides a list of national organizations, online resources, and tools that professionals can leverage to support mental well-being. Table 3 presents overarching recommendations, emphasizing the importance of a personalized, inclusive, and empowering approach to mental health. Finally, Table 4 offers practical strategies to implement these recommendations, suggesting specific actions that can be incorporated into health and fitness programs to enhance SEMH outcomes for PLWD. Together, these tables offer a valuable roadmap for creating holistic and supportive wellness programs.

Table 1: Key Terms, Definitions, Characteristics, and Medications

Table 1 provides essential definitions of common mental health conditions and associated symptoms that may affect PLWD. It covers terms such as depression, anxiety, stress, panic attacks, and sensory needs. For each condition, the table describes what these issues might look like in terms of physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms along with commonly prescribed medications. For example, depression is characterized by persistent sadness, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating, while anxiety often manifests through rapid breathing, a racing heart, and excessive worry. PLWD may exhibit a range of common signs and symptoms, including physical issues like difficulty breathing, headaches,

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TABLE 1: Key Terms, Definitions, Characteristics, and Medications

Term	Definition	Characteristics that may be Present (*e.g.*, What it might look like)	Medications Often Used in Treatment (Not an exhaustive list)
Depression	A mood disorder that can cause a persistent feeling of sadness, loss of interest, and difficulty functioning in daily life	• Sadness, anxiety, irritability • Sleep disturbances • Changes in appetite • Physical discomfort (aches, pains, headaches, stomach problems) • Difficulty concentrating or decision-making • Fatigue • Feelings of guilt worthlessness, helplessness • Suicidal thoughts or self-harm	• Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs; *e.g.*, fluoxetine, sertraline) • Selective serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs; *e.g.*, venlafaxine, duloxetine) • Norepinephrine-dopamine reuptake inhibitors (NDRIs; *e.g.*, bupropion)
Anxiety	Intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations	• Fast heart rate • Rapid breathing • Sweating • Tiredness	• SSRIs • SNRIs • Benzodiazepines (*e.g.*, lorazepam, clonazepam) ○ Used mainly for acute management ○ Long-term use is usually discouraged • Can worsen cognitive function and balance
Stress	State of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation	• Irritable, angry, impatient, or wound up • Overburdened or overwhelmed • Anxious, nervous, or afraid • Like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch them off • Unable to enjoy yourself • Depressed • Uninterested in life • Like you've lost your sense of humor • A sense of dread • Worried or tense • Neglected or lonely • Existing mental health problems getting worse	• No specific medications indicated, but could consider same medications used in the treatment of depression and anxiety
Panic attack	A brief episode of intense anxiety, which causes the physical sensations of fear	• Racing heartbeat • Shortness of breath • Dizziness • Trembling • Muscle tension	• Benzodiazepines ○ Used primarily as abortive treatment ○ Goal is to use sparingly • SSRIs • SNRIs
Sensory needs	How individuals receive and respond to information from their environment: see, hear, feel, smell, and taste	• Fidgeting • Covering eyes or ears frequently • Avoidance of sensory stimulation • Sensitivity to sounds • Fear of crowds	• No specific medications indicated
Cognition and memory concerns	Cognition refers to mental processes like learning and decision-making, while memory concerns involve difficulties in retaining and recalling information, both of which can affect daily functioning and quality of life, which may have resulted from an injury, having a stroke, spinal cord injury, TBI, etc.	• Difficulty concentrating • Difficulty remembering recent events • Difficulty following conversations • Difficulty problem-solving • Confusion • Disorientation • Asking the same questions • Misplacing items	• Stimulants (*e.g.*, dextroamphetamine/amphetamine, methylphenidate) ○ Useful in improving attention/concentration ○ Can lower seizure threshold • NDRIs ○ Useful in improving attention/concentration • Can lower seizure threshold

pain, and rapid heart rate; cognitive challenges such as confusion, hypervigilance, nightmares, and difficulty concentrating; emotional responses like agitation, depression, and guilt; and behavioral changes including increased alcohol use, antisocial behavior, inability to rest, and suspiciousness (19). Understanding these definitions and characteristics are crucial for exercise professionals as they incorporate mental health support into their programming.

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TABLE 2: Mental Health Resources

Mental Health Resources	Descriptions and Contact Information
Mental Health America	The Nation's leading national nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of mental health, well-being, and illness prevention. Annual State of Mental Health in America report is among the most widely respected health reports in the nation. https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america Online Screening Program 11 free, anonymous, confidential, and clinically validated screens that are among the most used mental health screening tools in clinical settings. Nation's largest ongoing, real-time mental health early identification program. Screening tests are available: https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/ Treatment Locator: mhanational.org/finding-help
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)	The Nation's largest grassroots mental health organization, dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. More than 700 NAMI state organizations and affiliates who work in US communities to raise awareness and provide support and education to those in need. https://www.nami.org NAMI Helpline offers one-on-one help with mental health questions and concerns, suggests resources, and shares support and encouragement. Call: 1-800-950-6264 Press 1 for adults Press 3 for teen/young adult Chat or Text "helpline" to 62640 Helpline is available M–F, 10 a.m.–10 p.m. ET. In a crisis, call or text 988 (24/7). https://www.nami.org/support-education/nami-helpline/
National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)	The Nation's premier center dedicated to advancing inclusion by promoting the health and wellness of people with disabilities through evidence-based programs, resources, campaigns, and strategic initiatives. https://www.nchpad.org/ NCHPAD GROWTH Program A 6-week program focused on fundamental strategies to nurture mental health and well-being for individuals with an existing disability or recent diagnosis. https://www.nchpad.org/nchpad-connect/growth/
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	Treatment Locator Confidential and anonymous resource for persons seeking treatment for mental and substance use disorders in the United States and its territories. findtreatment.samhsa.gov National Helpline 1-800-662-HELP (4357) https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline Disaster Distress Helpline National hotline dedicated to providing year-round disaster crisis counseling. This toll-free, multilingual, crisis support service is available 24/7 to all residents in the United States and its territories who are experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Call or text 1-800-985-5990 https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline	The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the United States. www.988lifeline.org Call 988 Text HOME to 741741 to reach a volunteer crisis counselor.
National Domestic Violence Hotline	This 24/7 hotline will direct you to a shelter nearest you. 1-800-799-7233 https://www.thehotline.org/
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention	Suicide Prevention Resources https://afsp.org/suicide-prevention-resources/

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TABLE 2: Mental Health Resources, (Continued)

Mental Health Resources	Descriptions and Contact Information
American Psychological Association (APA)	Training modules and guidelines emphasizing accessibility, cultural competence, and interdisciplinary collaboration in mental healthcare. https://www.apa.org/
Inclusive Well-Being Translational Science Collaborative	Inclusive Well-Being Translational Science Collaborative is Dr. Robin Lanzi's "lab" dedicated to bridging the gap from research and discovery to practice and policy with a focus on disabilities/chronic health conditions and social, emotional, and mental well-being. Dr. Lanzi's scholarly work is based on community-based participatory research where all of it is with the community—"coleading, colearning, and cocaring." Dr. Lanzi's website and social media platforms are continuously updated with science, practical applications, and ways to connect. Dr. Robin Lanzi, director; rlanzi@uab.edu; 205-975-8071; Web site: go.uab.edu/iwtsc
Podcasts	Huberman Lab Free podcasts: https://www.hubermanlab.com/podcast (Regularly ranked as the no. 1 health podcast in the world, Dr. Huberman discusses science and science-based tools for everyday life.) Jay Shetty On Purpose Podcast ("the world's no. 1 Mental Health podcast") http://www.youtube.com/@JayShettyPodcast.
Insight Timer	Free apps for meditation and relaxation: https://insighttimer.com/

Table 2: Key Resources

Table 2 outlines a variety of national mental health organizations and resources that can assist individuals with mental health concerns. It highlights resources like Mental Health America, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and the American Psychological Association (APA), which provide support, education, and mental health screenings. This table also includes links to free mental health screening tools and suggests useful apps for relaxation and mindfulness. These resources offer exercise professionals valuable tools to enhance the mental health support they provide in their programs.

Table 3: Key Themes, Insights, and Implications for Incorporating Social, Emotional, and Mental Wellness in Health and Fitness Programming

Table 3 summarizes insights gained from interviews and focus groups with PLWD, highlighting the key themes in mental wellness (18). These include the importance of a personalized approach to mental health, fostering social interaction, managing stress, and empowering clients through autonomy and self-advocacy. This table's overarching recommendations for incorporating social, emotional, and mental wellness emphasizes the need for exercise professionals to integrate these themes into their programs, ensuring they are tailored to the unique needs of PLWD.

Table 4: Practical Strategies for Incorporating Social, Emotional, and Mental Wellness

Table 4 offers practical strategies for exercise professionals to incorporate social, emotional, and mental wellness into their programs. It suggests specific actions like tailoring fitness plans to individual mental health needs, integrating mindfulness exercises into workouts, fostering social engagement through group activities, and teaching emotional regulation techniques. This

TABLE 3: Key Themes, Insights, and Implications for Incorporating Social, Emotional, and Mental Wellness in Health and Fitness Programming*

Key Theme	Insights	Implications for Incorporating Mental Health in Physical Fitness Programming for PLWD
Personalized approach to mental health	Mental health is understood differently by each individual; programs must cater to personal definitions of mental well-being.	Tailor wellness programs to align with participants' perspectives, ensuring relevance, and effectiveness.
Social interaction and inclusion	Participants emphasized the importance of social connections and community-building activities.	Encourage social interaction through group activities that combat isolation and promote shared experiences.
Stress management	Stress management tools like mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques were identified as essential for mental well-being.	Integrate mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and cognitive behavioral strategies into program content to help participants manage stress.
Empowerment and autonomy	Programs that foster self-advocacy and goal setting enhance participants' sense of control and purpose.	Empower PLWD by incorporating strategies that promote self-regulation, goal achievement, and participation in meaningful activities.

*Information gleaned from conducting interviews and focus groups with people living with disabilities and their families, providers, health coaches, and stakeholders (18).

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TABLE 4: Practical Strategies, Descriptions, and Examples for Incorporating Social, Emotional, and Mental Wellness in Health and Fitness Programming

Strategy	Description	Example
Tailor programs to individual needs	Individuals with physical disabilities have unique mental and emotional health needs, which require personalized fitness plans. Initial assessments should include not only physical health evaluations but also discussions on mental health goals, stressors, and social needs. Understanding each client's mental health perspective will allow professionals to design programs that address emotional regulation, stress management, and social engagement.	During intake, include a mental health questionnaire that asks clients about their stress levels, mood, and social engagement. Use this information to adapt physical activities that are manageable and mentally supportive.
Integrate mindfulness and relaxation practices	Mindfulness and relaxation techniques are effective in managing stress and promoting emotional balance. Simple mindfulness exercises such as deep breathing, guided meditation, or progressive muscle relaxation can be integrated into warm-ups and cool-downs during fitness sessions. These techniques not only reduce stress but also help individuals focus on their body's capabilities, fostering a sense of control and mental clarity.	Introduce a 5-minute guided breathing exercise at the beginning of a workout to help clients calm their mind and set a positive tone for the session.
Foster social engagement and support networks	Social engagement is a key component of mental health, especially for those who may feel isolated due to a variety of factors including physical disabilities. A few suggestions that might support this include incorporating group-based activities and peer support systems into programming. Even small-group training sessions can help clients develop relationships, share experiences, and feel part of a community.	Design fitness classes that include partner exercises or group challenges to foster camaraderie and social interaction. Encourage clients to participate in community fitness events or online support groups.
Empower clients through goal setting and autonomy	Goal setting is a powerful motivator, especially for individuals managing physical disabilities. Helping clients set realistic, achievable goals provides a sense of purpose and empowerment. Exercise professionals can work with clients to establish both short-term and long-term goals that are meaningful and aligned with their physical capabilities. Empowering clients to track their progress and celebrate milestones enhances their sense of control and motivation.	Work with clients to develop personalized fitness goals and check in regularly to adjust these goals based on progress. Encourage clients to celebrate small victories, such as completing a new exercise or increasing their workout intensity.
Teach emotional regulation and stress management techniques	Exercise professionals should teach clients how to manage emotional responses to physical challenges. For individuals with physical disabilities, the frustration of limitations can lead to negative emotional responses. Techniques such as cognitive-behavioral strategies (*e.g.,* reframing negative thoughts) or simple stress-relief practices (*e.g.,* deep breathing) can help clients remain positive and motivated during workouts.	Guide clients through a cognitive reframe by encouraging them to focus on their strengths instead of their limitations. An effective tool is introducing the concept of "controlling the controllables," which emphasizes what they can control now and what may come with time. The power of adding "yet" to a statement can be transformative: "I cannot lift more than 5 pounds, yet" or "I have not been able to swim a full length of the pool yet."
Trauma-informed care	Trauma-informed care involves recognizing the profound impact trauma can have on a person's neurological, psychological, and emotional well-being. This approach is rooted in understanding how past traumatic experiences can affect daily coping mechanisms and responses to stress. Exercise professionals should be mindful of potential triggers, which may cause clients to feel unsafe or overwhelmed and create an environment that fosters a sense of safety, trust, and empowerment.	Ask open-ended questions to give clients control over their exercise choices. Provide options for clients to opt out of activities that feel unsafe and encourage them to communicate any triggers they may experience. Prioritize creating a supportive and nonjudgmental environment.

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table provides clear examples, such as using a mental health questionnaire during intake or introducing guided breathing exercises at the beginning of a session, which can enhance the mental and emotional support provided to clients with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL TAKEAWAYS

The growing population of PLWD in the United States highlights the urgent need for inclusive and accessible mental wellness programs that address both physical and mental health. Exercise professionals have a unique and critical role to play in bridging the gap between traditional fitness programming and comprehensive mental health support. It is crucial for exercise professionals to stay within their scope of practice when offering mental health resources to PLWD. Individualized mental health plans should be developed exclusively by qualified mental health professionals. However, by integrating SEMH strategies into their fitness programs, exercise professionals can make a significant impact on the overall well-being of PLWD, promoting resilience, reducing anxiety, and improving quality of life.

Successful programs must be co-created with PLWD, ensuring that their specific needs and challenges are addressed from the outset. Interdisciplinary collaboration between exercise professionals and mental health experts is essential to developing effective personalized programs that foster emotional well-being alongside physical fitness. As research consistently demonstrates, the mind-body connection is vital to achieving optimal health outcomes. By adopting an inclusive equity-driven approach and addressing both mental and physical health, exercise professionals can transform the lives of PLWD, helping them to thrive in all aspects of life.

Ultimately, the integration of SEMH elements into fitness programming is not just a pathway to better health outcomes but a necessary step toward creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for all individuals, regardless of physical ability. As exercise professionals continue to develop their roles in this space, they contribute to breaking down barriers and reducing disparities in healthcare for PLWD, promoting a future where everyone has access to the holistic care they deserve.

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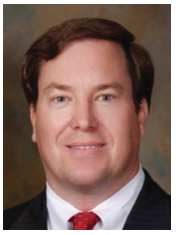

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